

Golf Course Nature Tours Okatie Creek Front Nine Handout

Welcome to the Okatie Creek Golf Club, the first of three courses here in Sun City Hilton Head. Before Sun City this was farmland, growing cotton and indigo in the 1940's. In 1943 the Argent Cattle and Lumber Company purchased it for hardwood tree harvesting and cattle grazing. In 1958 Union Camp converted most into a **Loblolly pine** tree farm for paper. There were also several deer and wild pigs hunting camps. In 1993 SCDOT built U.S. 278 and the I-95 connector, and Beaufort-Jasper Water and Sewer built an \$11 million-dollar project to bring water to the Okatie area. The Del Webb ground-breaking was May 17th of 1994. Completed in 1995, this golf course has always been a lovely combination of rolling fairways, preserved woods and picturesque lagoon. In 2013, the course closed for 3 months while the greens, cart paths, and landscaping were updated. This tour gives you an opportunity to see Sun City in a new light - from the rear! You will lose your sense of direction as we twist and turn through the front 9 holes, but we will do our best to identify where you are as we go. We will not necessarily stop on every hole, but we will cruise through slowly and hope to see some of our local wildlife 'at play'. For safety reasons, please watch the cart ahead of you and try not to tailgate!

The lagoon often has an **anhinga**. **Fox squirrels** are related to gray squirrels but have more variable coloring including a facial mask with white patches on the nose, paws and ear tips, and they are larger than gray squirrels, about twice the size. Their coloring may be either gray, black or brown, with gray accounting for 74%, black 24% and only 2% brown. We will be driving through the **tunnel that goes under Sun City Blvd**, the **Loblolly pines** on the right were planted in straight lines for the plantation and is less noticeable as new pines growing naturally are filling in.

Hole #2 - Across the lagoon is the **rookery**, a communal area where birds gather at night and for nesting. Communal nesting is for safety, early notice of predators and the ability for several adults to attack potential predators. Year round, we will see **Great Egrets, Great Blue Heron, Anhinga, Double Crested Cormorants, White Ibis, Turkey Vultures, Black Vultures, and Bald Eagles**. There is a large alligator in this lagoon, and you can sometimes see baby alligators sunning right at the edge of the green.

Hole #3 – “Okatie’s signature hole.” The tee markers are different as this hole is frequented by **vultures** that took to burying the round plastic ball tee markers. The prime difference is the red head of the **Vulture** and the black head of the **Black Vulture**. They keep our Sun City streets clean of dead creatures and remove other carrion before it can spread illness. Look for **Osprey** here. **Date Palms** lining the community entrance, not native to this area, are at the farthest north that they will survive. As a comparison, the palms behind us in the triangle are native **Sabal Palms**, also known as Cabbage palms or **Palmettos, our state tree on our state flag**.

Hole #4 – The first spot with houses on Okatie Creek, some of the first Del Webb homes within Sun City with the wide variety of roof lines offered “early on.” Okatie Creek and Hidden Cypress are **Audubon International Certified Wildlife Sanctuaries**. Audubon International, not part of the Audubon associated with birds, is an organization that works with golf courses, communities and others to help them implement environmental management practices that ensure natural resources are sustainably used and conserved.

1 | Page Groups that have developed and help run the Nature Tours: The Bird Club, Hunting & Fishing Club, Avante-Gardeners, Okatie Farmers, Troon Golf and Golf Services, and the Golf Advisory Committee

Golf Course Nature Tours Okatie Creek Front Nine Handout

To keep this certification, Golf Maintenance staff have the difficult task of balancing the ideal golf course playability and implementing conservation measures, and are working with Audubon International to increase “no mow” areas to help expand habitat and provide possible food sources for wildlife; maintain buffered areas around certain lagoons to provide shelter for wildlife and nesting birds; mow lagoon buffers over the winter to keep them under control, letting them grow in the warmer months for nesting; reduce the number of pesticide applications and use only in affected areas; and plant areas of **wildflowers beginning on Okatie Creek here.**

On our right we see ducks in the winter, **Hooded Mergansers and the little Pied-billed Grebes and Anhingas and Cormorants** often perch in the trees around the edges. **Bluebirds** are common all over Sun City. Bluebird boxes have recently been installed along the fairways of Hidden Cypress and Okatie Creek golf courses as a cooperative venture between the **Sun City Bird Club, Woodworkers, and Golf Services.** The Bird Club maintains **more than 180 boxes in Sun City.** If you see a bluebird building a nest in your lower mailbox, please discourage it by removing the nest materials, as nesting in these boxes is a certain death sentence for the baby birds, and possibly even the parent if it is sitting on the nest when someone shoves something into the box. Make sure not to breath in dust from the nesting material when you remove it.

Hole #5 –The alligators here are **American Alligators**, once on the endangered species list. Due to state and federal regulations, habitat preservation, and decreased use of alligator products, they have made a big comeback and number at over one million, live 35 to 50 years in the wild, can grow up to 15 feet, and weigh over 1000 pounds. Although they often appear lazy and slow, they can move very quickly, and become aggressive during mating season, which is in the spring, in their territory around the lagoons and when they have been fed. Always be alert and aware around lagoons, especially with children or pets, as alligators live in all the lagoons here in Sun City. Never feed an alligator!

This lagoon hosts **Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Anhingas, Cormorants,** and sometimes **Little Blue Herons.** Up to this point from the clubhouse through the fifth hole we have been traveling “to or parallel with” Hwy 278 and now we will take a sharp left and head back in the opposite direction. Just as we enter the wooded area, we will stop for a moment to see the **radio-controlled irrigation system equipment.** This allows the course irrigation to be remotely controlled. The water for irrigating comes primarily from Beaufort county as tertiary treated water, with lagoons as a back-up.

Not all lagoons in Sun City are considered fishing lagoons by the **Sun City Fishing and Hunting Club.** Lagoons that are accessible from common ground property can be freely fished. There are four ponds on Okatie Creek that are **designated for sustainability**, this and three are on the back nine, located at #10, #11 and #17. The Club helps with maintenance of the lagoons by building and installing “**spider blocks**” made of cinder block, piping and concrete to improve fish health. These blocks become homes for small fish which serve as food for larger fish, maintaining a healthy, sustainable ecosystem. Fisherman are not to go on private property unless permission is given by the homeowner. Small areas of common ground adjacent to a pond is considered access for fishing. Residents should remember that **anything that ends up in the streets of Sun City eventually ends up in our ponds and wetlands and then rivers!**

2 | Page Groups that have developed and help run the Nature Tours: The Bird Club, Hunting & Fishing Club, Avante-Gardeners, Okatie Farmers, Troon Golf and Golf Services, and the Golf Advisory Committee

Golf Course Nature Tours Okatie Creek Front Nine Handout

Hole #6 –The homes on the right are on Screven Court off Argent Blvd and the homes on the left face Robert E. Lee Lane.

Hole #7- Basically a nature sanctuary from start to finish, is deep within the Historic Village area of Sun City. The homes at the back of the green are located on Honey Hill Dr., one of the first streets to be developed in Sun City. Over the years this hole has had drainage problems; it now has a myriad of pipes and drains beneath the fairway used to fix what was a soggy location on the golf course and now a great hole to make par or birdie.

Snakes perform an important role in our environment by helping to keep rodents and other pests under control. South Carolina has 42 species of snakes, only 6 of which are venomous. The most common venomous snake we see is the **copperhead**, which also has the least toxic venom. If you encounter a snake, *simply back away*.

We often hear and see **Coopers** and **Red-tailed Hawks** perched in the trees. **Raptors** hunt small rodents, snakes and other small creatures. This brings up the issue of **rodenticides**. Rodenticides work by thinning the blood, which causes internal bleeding in the rodent, killing them. However, they do not always die immediately, which means they could be caught and eaten by a raptor- which means they also eat the poison, causing internal bleeding and probable death of the raptor. We strongly recommend the use of old-fashioned traps to rid your property of unwanted rodents rather than poison.

Hole # 8 – Surrounded by some of the earliest homes in Sun City, the green was dense with trees around the back, a postage stamp in the middle of a forest. Without direct sun and air, it didn't thrive, so trees were cut back to the point we see today. Next to the cart path, you will see one of our more familiar native plants, the **Live Oak** with **Spanish Moss** hanging from the branches. **Native plants** are plants that have been growing in an area before it was settled by people from other parts of the world. They have co-evolved with other plants and animals specific to an area. Over long periods of time they have adapted to climatic conditions where they grow. They are drought tolerant, and therefore require less irrigation than many plants that have been introduced. Many **native plants** have developed defense systems which help protect them from insects and foraging by predators, provide wildlife habitat which is more beneficial than that provided by introduced species of plants, a much richer source of food for bees and birds, thus need to be preserved or planted in areas large enough to support communities of wildlife. Native plants on the golf course are **Live oak trees, Red oak trees, Sabal palm (our state tree), Saw palmetto, Sweet gum trees, Resurrection ferns, Spanish moss, Wax myrtle, and rushes and grasses, Pickerelweed, Blue flag iris**, and more that grow along the edge of ponds. Many of the plants we associate with the traditional South, such as Crepe Myrtle, Oleander and Camellias are not native. The **Sun City Bird Club website has a new section on native plants for your yard.**

Spanish Moss is a tropical and subtropical plant is in the bromeliad family, related to the pineapple and is not a parasite taking nutrients from the air and water from rain. It will not kill the tree, is home to many creatures, not chiggers, and has been used for insulation, mulch, and mattress and car seat stuffing. When the weather has been dry, the **resurrection fern** appears brown and dead and turn lush and green with rain.

Golf Course Nature Tours Okatie Creek Front Nine Handout

Sun City has **260 lagoons or ponds**. Only a small number of these lagoons are configured to have water levels managed by staff. All others are subject to Mother Nature's whims. They add beauty to our surroundings, **and were designed to prevent flooding, hold and clean water, and support natural habitats**. The Lowcountry is very close to sea level, thus the water table is high. Wetlands act as a sponge, and development covered precious acreage that was used to soak up rainwater leaving the area prone to flooding. The lagoon system allows the water to flow down the street drains and off the roads into the lagoons, then eventually into the wetlands and local rivers, which include the **New River and the Okatie River**, allows Sun City to utilize the water for irrigating common areas and golf courses, saving money for residents. Sun City receives a **credit each year from Beaufort County for use of Best Practices** in caring for and monitoring our run-off.

Native plants holding the soil at the edges of the ponds, absorb excess nutrients that wash off lawns and roads when it rains, sequester chemicals, fertilizers and pesticides, and act as a buffer to prevent chemicals from entering the lagoons. Without them, the oxygen levels in the ponds would drop and cause algae blooms- not good for aquatic ecosystems (and not too attractive, either...). The plants also provide habitat for native wildlife, such as **dragonflies, fish, alligators, and wading birds such as herons and egrets**. The ditches here and on the nature trail were dug during the time this land was a pine plantation to drain water from the swamp away from the roots of the pine trees.

There are some things that residents can do to help make sure our lagoons, wetlands and, therefore, our rivers, stay clean and healthy.

1. Leave a **vegetated buffer** 1' high and 1' wide along your lagoon edge. **Do not remove any plantings** that have been installed on the edge of lagoons.
2. Take your car to a commercial car wash. Golf carts should be **washed over a grassy area to filter the water**. If you need to wash at home, choose a **biodegradable soap** available in auto stores and on-line.
3. **Reduce pesticide and fertilizer** use in your yards and on plants. Our centipede grass, the most common lawn grass in Sun City, does not need or like fertilizer. If you must use fertilizer, liquid is recommended.
4. **Do not place foreign objects, fish or plants** from a home fish tank, into any lagoon.

Hole #9 – The lagoon next to the tees has a pump house for irrigation of the course. Across the lagoon near the practice area, is **mistletoe**, a parasitic plant that, once attached to a host tree, obtains its moisture and nutrients from the tree. This can cause slowing of growth, and death of some limbs. If the infestation is heavy enough, it can kill the tree. We have the **American Crow**, which is the one we normally think of when we think of crows, with its signature “Caw Caw” sound, and the **Fish Crow**, a little smaller and has shorter legs, its call sounds more like a laugh. The **Wood Stork** is on the endangered species list, so we're happy to see them here in Sun City. We didn't see them on this course, but Okatie Farmers have helped us and have a total of 320 plots and its own bee hives. The club strongly discourages products with the pesticide **neonicotinoid** since they will affect bees and other pollinators.